Title: Gender and the Problem of Representation in Chinua Achebe's Fiction

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Synopsis

Known and remembered as the "Father of Modern African Literature", the works and legacy of Chinua Achebe (1950-2013) remain invaluable for African Literature in English and for the world of literature at large. Achebe's works have generated a lot of critical acclaim and critical responses the world over. His first novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) gave a huge impetus to African literature in English by portraying a society on the brink of radical changes and disintegration introduced by the colonial enterprise. *Arrow of God* (1964) also had for its focus the first point of contact between native and alien ideologies that drive a powerful and revered Chief Priest towards impotence and ultimately, madness. *No Longer at Ease* (1960) is a sequel of sorts to Achebe's first novel, tracing the story of the grandson of Okonkwo, the male protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*. *A Man of the People* (1966) is set in a corrupt postcolonial clime where nothing much has changed for lay people despite independence. Achebe's last novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) portrays the fictional country of Kangan under military rule, mirroring the turmoil in contemporary politics in Nigeria where corruption is still rampant. Achebe's short story collection *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1972) has stories which bemoan the sad state of affairs against the backdrop of the Civil War in Nigeria (1967-1970) roused by the fight for a separate state of Biafra. The collection also has stories which explore the tensions inherent in the relationship between the individual and the community, tradition and modernity and such like. The title story "Girls at War" portrays a committed young girl who initially works for the militia and later has to depend on influential men in return for sexual favours when she is out of employment. "Dead Men's Path" highlights the tensions between an overzealous headmaster, who builds his school over land believed to be used as a pathway by departed souls, and the "heathen" community at large. Achebe's novels and short stories span across a substantive temporal framework beginning with *Things Fall Apart*, when the colonial administration was testing the waters and initiating its establishment, through colonial times in *No Longer at Ease*, political independence in *A Man of the People*, the Civil War in *Girls at War and Other Stories*, up to the military regime in Nigeria portrayed in *Anthills of the Savannah.* These works will be the focus of this dissertation which will seek to interrogate the representation of gender in Achebe's fiction.

Achebe's works have been acknowledged for effectively negotiating with the tensions and fissures introduced into Igbo society by the colonial enterprise and with effecting a re-invention of African culture (Gikandi 1991) denigrated by the same. The earliest critical responses to Achebe had for its focus the "colonial theme" (Killam 1969:85), and the resuscitation of Igbo society and culture through Achebe's revisionist approach. Gendered readings of Achebe from a feminist perspective gained ground from the 1980s onwards

following the trend of the "first things first approach" (Petersen 1984) whereby issues related to the effects of colonialism were seen to take precedence over issues relating to gender and women. Feminist criticism had for its specific focus the representation of women in Achebe's fiction (Nasser 1980, Stratton 1994, Boehmer 2005, Amadiume 1990). With the identification of a gradual progression in terms of the roles of women in Achebe's novels (Kolalwale 2006), the portrayal of Beatrice in his last novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) is seen as a conscious attempt on Achebe's part to revise the role of women in the postcolonial clime the novel is set in (Stratton 1994, Boehmer 2005, Amadiume 1990, Diala 2004).

While a lot of critical attention has been paid to the issue of representation of women's issues in Achebe's novels, there are a few commendable critical interventions regarding the androgynous nature of Igbo culture (Sircar 2006), the balance and complimentarity of masculine and feminine principles (Achebe 2009), and the representation of masculinity (Osei-Nyame 1999, Quayson 1994) in *Things Fall Apart*. The majority of the gendered readings of Achebe's works seem to address only women, making a more holistic reading of gender configurations in Achebe desirable which is what this dissertation seeks to attempt. The research will be inter-disciplinary in nature, keeping in mind the works of gender theorists both from Africa and the West and postcolonial theorists whose works are centred on the issue of representation. It is proposed that the present study shall be carried out in five chapters. The following is an account of a tentative chapter division for the same.

The introductory chapter will introduce Achebe's oeuvre and legacy in Modern African Literature in English and lay down the objective and scope of the study. It will include a critical research review of gendered readings of Achebe's fiction and identify gaps in the existing research which the study will need to address. It will also discuss the theoretical framework and methodology of the study, while introducing the dissertation and discussing limitations of the same.

2. Representation of Gender in Achebe's fiction**:** This chapter will try and go beyond simply discussing women in Achebe's fiction and look into issues of men and masculinity and the possibility of queer valences in Achebe. It will explore the representation of masculinities in Achebe's work and look at the different configurations of masculinities—dominant, alternate, subordinate among others—in Achebe's work. It will also look at the representation of "female masculinity", given that masculinity cannot be reduced to the male body and its effects (ibid). A characteristic silence on the issue of homosexuality has been observed in literary works dealing with colonial rule in Africa and African scholars have been observed to deny the existence of homosexuality in their works . This denial has oftentimes been construed as a mode of resistance against colonial representations of Africa as a land of perverse sexuality. Moreover, homosexuality was viewed as a colonial import and not really applicable among the natives. However, instances of homoerotic relations between the colonial administrators and native men in the colonies tell a different story. This chapter will explore Achebe's apparent silence on homosexuality in his works. This chapter will thus try and understand how gender is represented as a crucial index of colonial control and of change and upheaval in Achebe's works.

3. Colonialism, Gender and the Achebean Response: This chapter will make an attempt at charting the relationship between the configurations of gender roles and the colonial project. It will try and understand the workings of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 1995) of the colonial

administrators that are at odds with indigenous manifestations of masculinity. "Hegemonic masculinity"—"the form of masculinity which is culturally dominant in a given setting" perpetuates new gender norms which disrupt indigenous norms already in place. Given that the substantive effect of gender is "performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence", hegemonic masculinity establishes a kind of gender coherence by deeds that are repeated by the colonised. Repeated stylisation of the body of the colonised produces a "natural sort of being" whose colonisation is thus naturalised. This chapter will thus focus on how Achebe looks at the intricate relationship between gender and colonialism in his works.

4. Voices of resistance: Re-envisaging Gender in Achebe: This chapter will focus on the resistance to the crises in issues like selfhood, community living and nation-building, generated by the crisis in gender relations effected by the emasculating ideology of empire. This chapter will try to understand the narrative of resistance in Achebe's works from a gendered perspective. It will seek to understand how Achebe resists the binarisation of gender roles, the separation of the private and public sphere as masculine and feminine respectively, among others. It will interrogate how the emasculation of the natives during colonial times led over time to a stress on a certain kind of hypermasculinity that became characteristic of the postcolonial nation. It will also look at how changed gender relations introduced radical economic, social and political changes with the womenfolk largely ousted from the economic and socio-political spheres of influence. It will thus focus on instances in Achebe's work which uncover how the masculine ideology of empire and its "civilising mission" did more harm than good in the lives and times of Achebe's people.

5. Conclusion: This chapter will bring together all the findings of the research and streamline them to give the project wholeness and usefulness for re-thinking the issue of gender in Achebe's fiction. It will also discuss the limitations of the research while exploring scope for further research on Achebe. It is hoped that this dissertation will help in adding to the understanding of gender in Achebe in a new light, not obscured by the somewhat dangerous conflation of "gender" and "women" characteristic of majority of the existing research on Achebe. It seeks to propose new ways of reading the workings, constructions, implications and repercussions of gender identities across pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial scapes mirrored in Achebe's fiction.

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